

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/200885>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2019-06-02 and may be subject to change.

**Chloé Maurel, Histoire des idées des Nations unies. L'ONU en 20 notions
(History of ideas of the United Nations: The UN in 20 notions)**

(Paris: L'Harmattan 2015), pp. 340, ISBN 978-2-343-05330-1, also available as an e-book

Reviewed by Bob Reinalda

Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands

Chloé Maurel belongs to a new generation of French contemporary historians interested in international organisations in a global context and promoting the study of the United Nations (UN) in French research. In 2010 she published a history of UNESCO between 1945 and 1974 as well as a history of international relations from 1945. These books were followed in 2014 by a handbook on global history, which against the background of globalisation provides a good overview of the change from 'world history' to 'global history' and summarises the theoretical debates in several countries. The handbook has the interesting, that is bilingual, subtitle of 'Comprendre le "global turn" des sciences humaines' (Understanding the 'global turn' of the human sciences). Her broad perspective and awareness of theoretical views make Maurel's publications attractive for both historians and political and other social scientists.

Maurel's book on the ideas that came out of the United Nations, or rather the UN System, as it also includes the specialised agencies, provides a chronological account of twenty major ideas that were created and further developed within these international organisations. There are good reasons to include the specialised agencies, as ideas are discussed by several organisations, sometimes simultaneously. In other cases a debate already held in one organisation is continued through a similar debate in another organisation, often examining the general aspects they have in common and organisation-specific elements. The ideas (sometimes referred to by two terms) are not grouped under more general headings, such as security or the economy, but are presented in separate chapters that more or less follow the history of the UN System and international relations. Each chapter discusses the origins of the idea, the actors who have promoted it and its actual impact in international relations or on people. Chapters are not restricted to the time of public introduction but also cover earlier or later developments and are not popular summaries but rather sound elaborations of the topic, with sufficient footnotes referring to both original sources and relevant literature. The bibliography at the end of the book provides literature on, respectively, multilateralism, international organisations, the UN, book publications by the United Nations Intellectual History Project (published between 2001 and 2010), the specialised agencies and (auto)biographies. As is often the case in France, the book does not have an index of persons, nor in this case an index of

ideas and notions (therefore one needs the digital book version to search the text). Also a list of abbreviations would have been helpful.

For reasons of presentation I will give an overview of the notions in this book by dividing them into groups of five. The first five notions are 'from world government to global governance' (1945), 'human rights' (1945), 'from peacekeeping to peacebuilding' (1948), 'non-proliferation' (1968) and 'biosphere' (1968). I have added some more or less formal years of introduction in order to provide a sense of chronology here, but it may be obvious that previous moments are important, such as 'atoms for peace' (1953) or 'peaceful uses of atomic energy' (1958) in the case of the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968. To illustrate what a chapter looks like, the sections of the Biosphere chapter deal with UN actions with regard to conservation of nature in the 1940s (an action by Julian Huxley), creation of international research institutions, studying humid and arid zones, the tension between conservation and exploitation of nature, beauty and character of landscapes, informing the public, political games, the 1968 UNESCO conference on the biosphere and the 1971 Man and the Biosphere project.

All notions in the second group of five, again with my time indications, were introduced and discussed during the 1970s. The first is 'corporate social responsibility' related to transnational corporations (early 1970s). The other four are 'basic needs' (1976), 'informal sector' (1972), 'world heritage' (1972) and 'New International Economic Order', also known by its abbreviation NIEO (1974).

The third group of five notions is made up of 'indigenous people' (1972), 'sustainable development' (1987), 'human development' (1990), 'education for all' (1990) and 'human security' (1994).

The last group contains 'decent work' (1999), 'global public goods' (2003), 'global health' (late 1990s), 'responsibility to protect' or R2P (2001) and 'cultural diversity' (2001).

It is most helpful that all chapters provide an overview of developments, actors and results. There is a slight over-representation of UNESCO information, which to some extent can be explained by the author's expertise, but also by the fact that by origin UNESCO is a stronger idea-based international organisation than, for instance, the World Bank, which however has produced, or helped to elaborate, certain ideas. The book ends with a conclusion, which discusses ways to make the UN more effective by referring to both structural problems, which do not seem to promote the development of ideas, and perspectives for a positive development. Although relevant, I would have preferred a concluding chapter, placing the ideas of the UN in a wider context of ideas, such as those developed by philosophers and political thinkers or which can be found in the body of literature within international relations that studies the diffusion of ideas and norms, among them the ideas addressed by the far more extensive United Nations Intellectual History Project. One of the volumes of this project discusses nine crucial ideas that have evolved over the UN's lifetime. These are framed somewhat differently, but overlap to a large extent, with 'gender' as the most striking one not discussed in Maurel's book. The most important difference between Maurel's book and the older one by Robert F. Gorman, *Great Debates at the United Nations: An Encyclopedia of Fifty Key Issues, 1945–2000* (Westport 2001), is that Gorman has a restricted number of suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, whereas Maurel's footnotes refer precisely to sources and literature. While Gorman gave years for all his topics, I found it difficult to pinpoint a central

year or other time indication for a specific notion when reading Maurel's chapters. I would advise the author to add a year or combination of years to the chapter titles in a second edition and also to consider whether topics related to certain time periods should be grouped under a heading which characterises that period (for instance, the 1970s and the rise of new states in the South). Also a second edition, or foreign translation, should definitely include an index of persons and notions as well as a list of abbreviations. Nonetheless, Maurel has written an essential and informative reference work, particularly taking into account the rising interest in the roles of ideas in international regulation.